Historic water agreement just the beginning

■ Tough task: The foundation for a solution is laid, but the war could resume.

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SACRAMENTO — For all of its importance, Thursday's historic plan to better protect the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is more a beginning than an end.

In the short run, thousands of farmers and 20 million Californians who rely on delta water have to figure out how to share the pain of improving conditions for fish and wildlife.

But in the long run, government officials, environmentalists and water users face even more difficult choices in balancing environmental needs with growing demand for water.

If the authors of Thursday's accord can strengthen their newfound mutual trust, they can shatter political gridlock and promote the construction of California's first new canals and reservoirs in about 20 years. If they can't, the water wars, lawsuits and name-calling will resume.

"This is not the solution to the delta's problems," said Steve Hall, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies and a key negotiator. "This is the foundation on which a solution can be built."

See WATER, Back Page

WHAT THE PACT DOES

The California water accord:

- Centers on water quality standards for San Francisco Bay and the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. More fresh water will be allowed to flow through the delta, holding down saltwater intrusion.
- Provides more reliable supplies for cities and farms, even though they will get somewhat less water. If more water is needed for newly endangered species, it will be purchased by the federal government from water users willing to sell.
- Means federal and state officials will jointly make environmental decisions in the delta, with the overall ecology in mind.
- Provides for closer coordination of the federal and state waterworks that divert water from the delta.
- Calls for greater environmental protections, such as installation of fish screens on water diversion pipes along the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, without increasing the costs of water.

Source: Associated Press

Parties must build on historic water pact

■ WATER

from Page 1A

That solution — expected to be developed over the next three years — might require even more extraordinary measures to help the delta's 120 species of wildlife, many of which have been ravaged by decades of diverting water away from San Francisco Bay to farms and cities.

Two species of fish — the winter-run Chinook salmon on the Sacramento River and the delta smelt — are listed as endangered. Federal wildlife officials Thursday postponed designating as threatened a third species — the Sacramento split-tail fish — and some biologists think up to a dozen additional species may merit special protection. Environmentalists also plan to seek additional water for the San Joaquin River, which has been reduced to little more than a trickle for much of the year.

But having agreed Thursday to cede as much as 30 percent of their water supplies in very dry years, farmers and cities have their own ideas for fixing the delta. One notion includes withdrawing more water from California rivers with new dams and canals.

Such projects have been taboo for about two decades as environmentalists prevented construction of new plumbing projects until ecological conditions improved. Now, there's a plan to help fish and wildlife. And in the glow of that agreement, no one would rule out anything.

"Everything is on the table when we start those discussions" over a long-range delta plan, said Wayne White, head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Sacramento office.

Everything? Including new dams and canals? "Absolutely. . . . Facilities are on the table," echoed Barry Nelson of the Save San Francisco Bay Association.

White even floated the two most emotionally charged words in California water politics — Peripheral Canal — in discussing ways that fish could be helped by relocating the huge pumps that suck water out of the delta. Another project likely to resurface is a large reservoir near Los Baños, which would hold water taken from the delta in very wet years, when it presumably would not be missed.

Despite the challenges ahead, it's difficult to overstate Thursday's achievement. Gov. Pete Wilson shared a very crowded podium in the state Capitol with frequent nemesis Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Environmental Protection Agency head Carol Browner. Equally as stunning, representatives of Central Valley farmers stood beside Los Angeles' water czar and environmentalists who had sued them both.

Wilson at one point compared the gathering to the Israeli-Palestinian peace accord, and as recently as a year ago, such a broad agreement on the delta seemed even more unlikely.

"I would say it's astonishing," said Felicia Marcus, head of the EPA's San Francisco office.

The delicately crafted compromise is similar to other, discarded delta-protection plans. Its biggest impact will be to limit the amount of water that can be pumped out of the delta in spring, when fish are considered particularly vulnerable.

This plan succeeded where others failed for three key reasons: First, federal wildlife officials accepted a more flexible regime in which pumping from the delta will be adjusted monthly, rather than once a year.

Second, they were willing to allow more water to be diverted in normal and wet years, in exchange for even tougher pumping limits in dry years. Fish and wildlife suffered acutely in the early years of the recent drought, when large-scale pumping continued even as the amount of water moving through the delta declined.

Third, federal officials agreed that they would not impose stricter pumping limits in the next three years, even if additional fish are added to the endangered-species list.

"Basically, what we're saying is a deal's a deal," Babbitt said. "We've made a deal, and if it turns out there are additional requirements of any kind, it'll be up to the United States and the federal agencies to find the water."

That gave farmers and cities the assurance they needed to accept large cuts in water deliveries. In the southern San Joaquin Valley, where the agreement will have its biggest bite, farmers could lose up to 75 percent of their water in dry years. In urban areas, the impact should be far less severe — about 25 percent reductions under the worst circumstances.

Agreement on each of these points, participants said, seemed to create an atmosphere of trust that led to additional agreements. Ultimately, that produced Thursday's historic agreement.

"It just kept getting bigger," said Marcus, the EPA official.